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Ex-analyst on Vietnam gets his day in court

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A NEW YORK — Sam Adams had it all memorized, right down to the day of the week (Friday) and the precise time (10:30 a.m.) on the day it all began nearly 19 years ago.

He rattled it off in an interview last week, shortly before he began his intricately woven testimony Thursday in the CBS libel trial. All the details, forever imbedded in his memory, poured out:

Aug. 19, 1966, a Friday. He was in his office on the fifth floor of the CIA headquarters building near Washington, where he was an analyst on Vietnam.

A captured document — Bulletin 689 — came in from a South Vietnamese province, Binh Dinh. It showed enemy strength there to be 10 times what official U.S. military estimates said it was.

"The thing came in at 10:30 a.m.," Adams recalled. "By 10:32, I realized I was in deep."

Sam Adams — whistle-blower, keeper of the numbers, the man who accused the U.S. military of "cooking the books" in Vietnam — is still deeply mired in the Vietnam numbers game. Almost two decades after he analyzed that first enemy document, he is still striving to convince the country that its military engaged in a "monument of deceit" about enemy strength in Vietnam in 1967 and 1968.

His forum is not quite what he expected back in 1966 — the defendant's chair, where his testimony resumes today. Adams, 51, along with CBS and two of its employees, stands accused by Gen. William C. Westmoreland of libeling him in a 1982 CBS Reports documentary. That documentary, *The Uncounted Enemy: A Vietnam Deception*, said that Westmoreland placed an arbitrary "ceiling" of 300,000 on the totals his own officers could report.

Although Westmoreland has put his tormentor in the dock, he has also highlighted Adams' allegations in a public arena. The highly publicized trial has informed considerably more people of Adams' dogged accusations than the CBS broadcast ever did — and the story CBS told, down to the last statistical detail, was Sam Adams' story.

Adams dissected the documents, made the projections, fought the military brass during the war, hounded intelligence officers for years afterward to confess to their own complicity. He indexed thousands of pages of documents, wrote massive "chronologies" in cramped handwriting so atrocious that Westmoreland's attorneys have squinted and sputtered trying to read them to the jury while Adams has suppressed a smile.

The wry smile spread across his face again and again Thursday as Adams, sometimes beguiling, sometimes grave, laid out for the jury what has come to be called "the Adams theory." He considers his chance to testify a "bonanza," and he seemed ebullient as he addressed his captive audience.

The jurors seemed charmed, at least early on, as Adams described his early CIA career as a Congo specialist. He regaled them with tales of spies counting precisely "three thousand and twelve guys" at a border post, of Che Guevara arriving in Africa with "a bunch of Cubans" in 1965 and of "this group of bad guys holed up in Angola."

When he told them that 26 countries were smuggling weapons into the Congo, he felt compelled to add that they filled the alphabet from "Albania to Zanzibar." When he described his interpreter in Vietnam — spelling her name for the court reporter, of course — he tossed off a one-liner: "She had one deficiency, which was she didn't speak English."

Even when his testimony turned to the substance of his allegations against Westmoreland, Adams was still folksy and compelling. He used such colloquialisms as "something funny was going on" and "it seemed awfully odd" in describing his realization that enemy troop numbers were being doctored.

Sam Adams
CBS based its report on his story

Asked in a videotaped interview shown to the jury why he went to Vietnam in 1967 to pursue his analysis of the enemy, he replied, "You know, there were not Viet Cong around Washington." And, describing in the same interview the military's tendency to "bargain" with the CIA over enemy estimates, he said, "What is this — a bunch of rug merchants we are here?"

When CBS decided to tell Adams' story in 1981, the network paid him $25,000 as a consultant. He led CBS producer George Crile to all the right sources, all the right numbers, to all the cables and documents Adams had taken from his CIA office and buried in trash bags on his farm in Virginia.

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Even the documents CBS has cited in court to support its broadcast were products of Adams' nearly two-decade crusade — a 1975 congressional investigation of U.S. military intelligence that echoed his own accusations and portions of at least one book that agreed with his conclusions. In addition, CBS attorneys have cited a 1975 Harper's magazine article written by Adams and edited by Crile.

As Crile put it in a note to CBS correspondent Mike Wallace, a fellow defendant: "Adams was the thread; he delivers the indictment to us."

He is an enigmatic figure, sitting at the defense table in baggy tweed jackets, hunkered over his chronologies and passing notes to CBS attorneys. He is convivial and vaguely eccentric, patiently explaining obscure intelligence finds and 17-year-old events in whatever degree of detail the listener seems to require.

Of the Binh Dinh report, which began the never-ending inquiry that led Adams to accuse Westmoreland of distorting enemy strength estimates for political reasons, Adams said in the interview: "It was just one crummy little document, but it was quite clear even then that this was a big deal."

Now, after condemning Westmoreland for all these years — Adams tried without success in 1973 to have the U.S. Army inspector general investigate Westmoreland for suspicion of violations of the Uniform Code of Military Justice — the accuser is the accused.

Westmoreland and Adams sit a few feet apart in the courtroom each day, the general brooding in silence and the analyst still taking copious notes and rewriting portions of a book on Vietnam, which is yet to be published.

The two men had never met until they found themselves in the same Washington law office for depositions in early 1983. Westmoreland, Adams recalled, "did not acknowledge my existence."

But the next day, Adams said, he greeted Westmoreland with "Hello, General" and was surprised to hear Westmoreland respond, "Hello, Adams."

Soon Sam Adams was fetching coffee and doughnuts for the general. Westmoreland's greetings evolved to "Hello, Mr. Adams" to "Hello, Sam," and, by Christmas of that year, to "Merry Christmas, Sam."

Just the other day, Crile said, Westmoreland twice stumbled over document boxes in a courthouse witness room and slyly accused Adams of setting them out as "booby traps" — a heated subject of debate in trial testimony.

"We're not bosom buddies," Adams said, "but it's civil."

In court, a prime CBS objective will be to refute characterizations of Adams by Westmoreland's witnesses as a rouge elephant within the CIA, an "obsessed" and detached "bean counter" with an irrational vendetta against Westmoreland.

One Westmoreland witness said Adams had "a hangup that borders on a mental condition." Another, Adams' former CIA boss, George Carver, said Adams was prone to "going off half-cocked," was "often in error but seldom in doubt," and "very intolerant of people who did not share the conclusions to which he jumped." Adams considered those who disagreed with him "as either fools or knaves."

Adams has called himself a "galloping ... Paul Revere," warning the intelligence community of the "monument of deceit" produced by the military's "faking" of estimates. Crile has called him a "whistle-blower," a man who has shone his "lantern in dark corners." Fellow intelligence analysts have called him a "brilliant" and "rigidly honest" analyst of extraordinary integrity.

Whatever the trial jury concludes about Adams' charges, as presented by CBS, he remains as sincerely committed to his version of the truth as Westmoreland is to his. In that sense, they are kindred spirits.

Because of Adams' campaign to have his story told, and because that story prompted Westmoreland's lawsuit, a new layer of Vietnam history is being written. The trial has produced dozens of previously secret documents and the sworn testimony of top Vietnam-era commanders and policymakers.

"In a historical sense," Adams said, the debate over the military order of battle detailing enemy strength "will go from a footnote to at least a couple of chapters in the history of Vietnam."

The public is still eager to learn about the root causes of the U.S. debacle in Vietnam, Adams said. Much of the trial's testimony is "arcane" and "eye-glazing stuff," he said, but "the dynamics of it — that, I think, is very interesting and very important."

When it is all over, he said, he will take six months and rework his book to include trial testimony that he said has "filled every conceivable hole." Only three of the book's 12 chapters deal with issues covered in the trial, he said.

Adams intends to reapply to work for the CIA, where he resigned in disgust in 1973. "If by some wild fluke they said yes, I'd sign right up," he said. He described the CIA in his testimony as "a very good place to work."

For now, he earns $200 a day plus expenses as a continuing CBS consultant. He complains of putting on 10 pounds since the trial began Oct. 9, of finding himself unwinding with a quart of beer some nights. He muses about "hitting the lecture trail" and one day being forced to "seek out honest work."

Mostly, Sam Adams keeps telling his story, trying to endure, trying to remind himself that he, not Westmoreland, is on trial. He believes that the weight and power of his story will vindicate him.

He speaks of Westmoreland charitably, calling him a "decent" and "likable" man. Beyond that, he does not dare characterize in an interview the general's motives during the war.

"The last time I got into that," he said, "I got hit with a $120 million libel suit."